

## Contract Workers Still Available To Millionaires

By Monte Noelke

7-4-68

Page 5

MERTZON — Some smart inventor is going to have to develop a robot that burns mesquite wood for fuel and can thrash livestock out of the remaining brush. Oldtime ranch hands are about gone. New recruits are becoming as scarce as soap dishes around a hippy colony, while most of ranchdom is so hard-pressed for operating money that the sheepdogs are learning to get by on mush made of re-run corn meal. In town, school kids are becoming so smart on this new math and old English that a career on the range is about as appealing to them as a tank full of giant squids would be to a professional fisherman.

One phase of the labor shortage that has not struck the Shortgrass Country is the scarcity of contract services. Other than sheep shearing outfits, we have an abundance of hourly workers ready to help us. Practically every small outpost has a windmill man and at least one tank builder. The only city in the area, San Angelo, abounds in plumbers, general repairmen, carpenters, electricians, and enough painters to double-coat every courthouse out here. Ranchers can contact these craftsmen simply by picking up the telephone.

Unlike what I've heard of the big cities, the price of these men's work is reasonable. Ranch operations diversified with oil and gas production can hire any of the skilled workmen just about any time they're needed. Medium-sized units backed by mining and banking interests can, by using a little judgment, hire all their major contract work done. Even a carefully managed outfit carrying 1000-plus mother cows can put aside some money to use on town-based laborers.

It's hard to find out precisely how much of the budget of an average sheep or cow ranch can be spent on contract work. After a dozen interviews I was more confused than ever. Ranchers' replies just didn't make sense.

One fellow would say he'd see everybody suffering from frostbite in hell before he'd spend his wool clip to get his back bedroom roof resingled. The next hombre would assure me that he'd go live with his in-laws rather than pay a plumber mileage plus time-and-a-half to set a bathroom fixture.

The women were more confusing than the men. Before I could get my pencil poised, they'd be rattling on about a long-ago plumbing job that ran \$1500 over the estimate, or raving about how their son nearly had to leave college because a painter miscalculated the cost of putting a prime coat on a hall closet. For all the good it did, I might as well have been interviewing a bunch of out-of-state foreigners.

It's sad that the cowboys are disappearing, but at least we can always count on our contract workers to be available — if there's anyone around who can pay them.